# [Review Essay] A Gnostic Study of Religions

# Method and Theory in the Study of Religion

## Review Essay A Gnostic History of Religions

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# Review Essay

# A Gnostic History of Religions

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*Abstract*

April DeConick's *The Gnostic New Age* demonstrates that scholarship of Gnosticism is still entrenched in an Eliadian phenomenological paradigm which essentializes an ahistorical sui generis "Gnosis". This approach is traceable to the Eranos Circle, particularly Carl G. Jung and Gilles Quispel, and builds certain philosophical and psychoanalytical affinities into an ahistorical religious current. DeConick' comparison with New Age is tenuous, and misses the important fact that Gnosticism and New Age share specific genealogical antecedents. Interdisciplinary work needs to pay more attention to the theological and colonial implications of categories, or such problematic categories will continue to take root in the gaps between academic specialisms.

*Keywords*

*Gnosticism, New Age, Spirituality, sui generis, phenomenology, Gilles Quispel*

April D. DeConick (2016). *The Gnostic New Age: How a Countercultural Spirituality Revolutionized Religion from Antiquity to Today*. New York: Columbia University Press.

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# Review Essay

# A Gnostic History of Religions

*Introduction*

April DeConick's *The Gnostic New Age: How a Countercultural Spirituality Revolutionized Religion from Antiquity to Today* (2016) argues that Gnosticism is (note the use of present tense) a "countercultural orientation towards a transcendent God and the divine power of the human" (5)[1] which emerged in antiquity but is re-emerging today in the New Age milieu. It is a "paradigm shift in our understanding of religion", according to Birger Pearson on the back cover; but in fact it is a continuation of a psychologized phenomenological approach to Gnosticism, which owes its theoretical heritage to the Eliadian History of Religion school. In this tradition, Gnosticism is neither a historically-contextualized group or movement, nor a heuristic analytical definition, but a *sui generis* type of religion, albeit vaguely defined. As such, DeConick is not so much breaking new ground as continuing in the furrow dug by Hans Jonas, Carl Jung and particularly Gilles Quispel.

The idea that the New Age milieu is in some way Gnostic in character is hardly new: the idea has most influentially been put forward by Wouter Hanegraaff in the 1990s, proposing that the New Age was a secularised form of Western Esotericism, which includes Gnosticism; Theosophists, however, have appealed to the Gnostics as their predecessors since the late nineteenth century. Such a comparison relies on Gnosticism being constructed as an ahistorical current, rather than a specific tradition with a historical transmission, established through perceived philosophical or psychoanalytical affinities, although these are frequently built upon to posit similarities of social context or spiritual need. Ultimately—and in common with the

[1] All references without an author and date refer to DeConick (2016a).

phenomenological approach of Eliade's History of Religion—this is an essentially theological endeavor.

Gnosticism, as approached by DeConick and many other scholars, demonstrates that such an approach is alive and well in Religious Studies. In addition, it shows how a zombie category (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002) can lumber on in defiance of all data against its existence.

*The development of Gnosticism as sui generis religious category*

The contemporary study of Gnosticism emerged from a unique confluence of historical circumstances at the end of World War II. The distrust of Christianity and strongly scientific academy in Germany during the Weimar Republic led scholars of religion to adopt a phenomenological approach in which religious "truth" was removed from the analytical table. It allowed such scholars to posit a "meta religion" (such as Otto's *Religioser Menchheitsbund*) of which earthly religions were versions, implicitly maintaining the superiority of Christianity as the highest manifestation (Junginger 2008, 8-9). After the War, however, there was a resurgence of studies in Christianity in the formerly Nazi-occupied territories of Europe, because of the need for removal of anything smacking of Indo-Aryanism, and to promote Christianity as a stabilizing influence (Junginger 2008, 4). These *phenomenological* approaches became a methodological norm known later as phenomeno*logy,* with the "scientifically" minded unaware of the Christian bias behind the original conceptions, and giving a veneer of "science" and therefore legitimacy to the more overtly theological (e.g. Mircea Eliade):

> The impact of heirophany on historical reality provided Historians of Religion [with] a kind of visionary exceptionalism that could be taken seriously even while remaining respectably inside the academy. These "phenomenologists of religion—under a Neitzschian influence diffused through a Jungian prism—thus glorified a heroism of private insight. They claimed to find "structures of consciousness" and "modes of being" and "heiropanies" and "religious realities" and "archetypes" *out there in history but also in here available to the needy reader* (Wasserstrom 1999, 195, emphasis in the original but nevertheless apropos).

At the same time, the problem of evil troubled many scholars and religious intellectuals in the wake of the Holocaust and burgeoning nuclear standoff of the Cold

War.[2] Gnosticism proved a perfect fit for these circumstances. It could be studied under the rubric of Christianity, but by suggesting that Yahweh was an insane, corrupted, or even evil Demiurge, it provided a radically different theodicy which could reconcile the historical horror of the twentieth century with the continuing possibility of transcendence and salvation. The phenomenological positing of a Gnostic essence and the paucity of primary sources made it malleable enough that Gnosticism was soon "discovered" in Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, and Hermetic sources.

The popularity of Gnosticism among scholars of religion was given extra momentum by the discovery of the Nag Hammadi corpus in 1945. The twelve-and-a-bit papyrus codices contained fifty-two previously unknown sectarian texts from the 4th Century (although almost certainly earlier in composition). It is not an overstatement to say that the discovery revolutionized knowledge about religion in the Middle East a few centuries on either side of the time of Jesus. It would be 1975 before the whole collection was made available to scholars, however, although small sections were published as early as 1956. In these early years, Nag Hammadi scholarship was controlled by Gilles Quispel and Charles-Henri Peuch, both of whom were dedicated Jungians (although to be clear, they were not responsible for the delayed publication). They brokered the purchase of one of the codices for the Jung Institute, and were actively involved in all plans towards publication until 1975.

Quispel and Peuch were members of the Eranos Circle, a private group of scholars and religious intellectuals who met annually in Switzerland. Jung was the most famous participant, but the Circle also included Henri Corbin, Gershom Scholem, Gerardus van der Leeuw, Ioan Couliano and Mircea Eliade, among other prominent figures. Eranos was explicitly phenomenological and implicitly spiritual, and many of the attendees had already adopted Jung's psychoanalytical reading of Gnosticism before the Nag Hammadi discovery. For Jung, Gnostics were the forerunners of psychotherapy, "the first thinkers to concern themselves (after their fashion) with the contents of the collective conscience", and he saw their writings as allegories of the process of

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[2] E.g. Birger Pearson's rather forced interpretation of the *Gospel of Truth* from Nag Hammadi in which the Israelites decry Yahweh's absence (Williams 1996, 78); Jung's *Answer to Job* (1952) and its indignant response from Martin Buber (Wasserstrom 1999, 234); Gershom Scholem's mythical description of Europe under Fascism as "the darkening of the world, the flight of the gods" (in Wasserstrom 1999, 128), and numerous others.

individuation (Segal 1987, 303). Jung's model was therefore incorporated into Nag Hammadi research *a priori* and enshrined in the definitions later produced by the Messina Congress of the International Association for the History of Religion in 1966. It would be a reasonable assumption that the IAHR Congress was convened in response to the Nag Hammadi finds being published, but in fact, the opposite was true: the texts had been deadlocked due to disagreements among the various parties involved, so by then only the (incomplete) Jung Codex had been published. In other words, these definitions were produced *without the data upon which such definitions should be based.*

The influence of Jung is clear. That "pneuma" is interpreted to mean the "the divine counterpart of the self", not the "soul" or "spirit" or "genius" or "atman" or "holy guardian angel", is an act of classification, rather than disinterested recognition:

> A coherent series of characteristics that can be summarized in the idea of a divine spark in man, deriving from the divine realm, fallen into this world of fate, birth and death, and needing to be awakened by the divine counterpart of the self in order to be finally reintegrated (in Williams 1996, 27).

A second significant influence can be detected here: Hans Jonas, a student of Rudolf Bultmann and Martin Heidegger who argued that the Gnostics were the forerunners of contemporary Existentialism in *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist* (1934) and *The Gnostic Religion* (1958). Jonas was a member of the committee at the Messina Congress, and his influence can be seen in the formulation of "fallen into this world of fate, birth and death", drawing from Heidegger's terminology of *verfallen,* from *Sein und Zeit* (1927). Jonas had been an early inspiration for Quispel, though they disagreed on the centrality of a negative evaluation of the cosmos (Quispel and Van Oort 2008, 142).

Three significant ideas were therefore present from the very earliest stages of translating and interpreting the Nag Hammadi codices: that the texts were a Gnostic library; that Gnosticism had a modern counterpart in contemporary thought, specifically psychoanalysis and/or existentialism (or even better, psychoanalysis that aimed to cure alienation, *i.e.* Jung); and that Gnosis was a *sui generis* perennial religious type. The first is still a matter of some debate; some may be considered Gnostic, depending on the definition employed, but some are certainly not, and many (if not most) scholars doubt they were ever a unified collection. The second is no more than

an interpretation, and a tenuous one at that; and the third an example of Eliadian phenomenological essentialism. Eliade was a major player in the Eranos Circle, and his influence is clear as Gnosticism comes increasingly to be constructed as a perennial hierophany, stripped of all historical context, capable of bursting into history when it is needed. The process by which these ideas were established remains largely unexamined by scholarship, however.

Nevertheless, Quispel's theoretical model of Gnosis as a special type of knowledge inspired many of the second generation of Gnostic scholars. Hanegraaff took from him the tripartite epistemological model, which was foundational for the establishment of the Western Esotericism sub-field. Elaine Pagels' influential *The Gnostic Gospels*, while not essentialist, nevertheless repeats the Jungian thesis (1979, 123-141). Quispel was one of the examiners for DeConick's doctoral thesis in 1993, and she considers him a mentor and "*Großdoktorvater"* (Quispel and van Oort 2008, xv-xvii).

Rather than a paradigm shift, then, *The Gnostic New Age* follows the Jung/ Quispel paradigm completely. Gnosticism is "its own unique form of spirituality" (9), "a therapy that restored them to spiritual and psychological wholeness" (11), and which "encourages us to seek the transcendent, the God Beyond All Gods, as the source of our being" (351).

*Rejection of Critical Scholarship*

DeConick's *The Gnostic New Age* is dismissive of recent critical work on Gnosticism, particularly that of Michael Williams (1996) and Karen L. King (2003). There are certainly significant criticisms to be made of these scholars' work, but DeConick chooses instead to brush them off through a series of polemical arguments which reveal her personal umbrage at their challenges to the category.

First, she misrepresents their arguments: neither Williams nor King argue that we should not use Gnosticism or Gnostic simply because "they were pejorative terms then and remain so now", as DeConick claims (5). Rather, they argue that we should not use them because the groups and texts they group together have no other commonality besides their being identified as heretical by Irenaeus and other early Christian heresiologists. This is a subtle but important distinction; the issue is not that the term is pejorative, but that it is *nothing but* a pejorative. The idea that there was a distinct

Gnostic theology or praxis has been shown by Nag Hammadi to be incorrect, so to present Gnosticism as either a distinct historical movement or a *sui generis* phenomenon makes no sense. It is defending the category over the data.

DeConick argues that these scholars lead us to a situation where "We have either declared the Gnostics heretics and thus not worthy of study, or we have deconstructed them so that the Gnostics have been tamed into Christians" (6). Both of these options are straw men. Recognizing that the *category* Gnosticism is constructed upon the rhetoric of the Church Fathers does not mean that those ideas and groups included within it are any less interesting or worthy of study, only that there is no *essential* feature connecting them beyond said rhetoric. Secondly, why would acknowledging the theological diversity of the early Christian period "tame" these groups? This theological diversity is an exciting challenge to the idea that there was a singular 'early Christianity'—certainly not a 'tame' notion for many. At no point does Williams suggest the field is not worthy of study, and indeed is clearly fascinated by these groups. He just does not accept that we should group them under an artificial and inaccurate rubric. DeConick, however, is reliant upon the opposition. Her argument is that the Gnostics were countercultural and rebellious, so she is reliant upon their being a normative culture to rebel against, whether this is supported by the data or not.

What makes these deconstructive approaches popular is not scholars being "trendy" and seeking novelty, nor "postmodern[ism]"[3] (5), but the simple fact that we only actually had the data to base the idea of Gnosticism upon since the mid-1970s. Yet what we see is a category which had become so firmly entrenched that some scholars, including DeConick, are reject the data because it does not fit the category, rather than the other way around. "Because this perspective has become so dominant," she writes, "since the 1980s definitions in academia have become impossible to maintain" (6). I suppose this must be particularly challenging when the data does not support them.

DeConick claims that the critical approach is dangerous because it denies the "coherent universal histories or ideologies that communities create to stabilize and

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[3] This is a claim she makes a number of times, specifically leveled at Foucault and Bourdieu (e.g. 2016b, 11), neither of whom are generally considered postmodernist. It is a form of *reductio ad absurdum,* arguing that if *this* category must be rejected, this means that therefore *all* categories must be rejected.

define themselves" (6), as though critical theory aims to disempower the subjects of its studies (and implicitly, minorities). This is patently untrue; the critical approach merely insists that we see such claims in their socio-historical context and in relation to power, and so by necessity exposes and challenges inequalities. Moreover, DeConick ignores that the communities she includes under the rubric here *did not* define themselves thus. Their inclusion is a scholar's decision; the ideology a scholarly invention. Furthermore, this argument utterly misses the point of Williams' argument; we should not refer to Gnosticism *as no such group of people ever existed*.

DeConick also fails to acknowledge that there are a number of groups who do actually identify as Gnostics today, including some that are rather large, like the Samael Aun Weor groups in Brazil and throughout South and Central America (Robertson 2018), Ecclesia Gnostica and the Johannite Apostolic Church in the United States. Perhaps this is because such groups tend not to present themselves as counter-cultural at all, but rather tend to play up their Christian credentials (Robertson 2018). What is certain, however, is that she is prepared to ignore the histories and ideologies these Gnostic communities use to define themselves.

*Historicism vs. Comparitivism*

*The Gnostic New Age* is strongest in the historical chapters detailing the development of a number of groups from antiquity to the 3rd century CE. We are never given the criteria for the selection of the case studies she uses—Mandaeism, Manicheism, Jeuians, and others, are simply described as "Gnostic religions"—yet, as histories, these are both readable and informative. Likewise, the accounts of the heresiologists in the first four centuries CE show a depth of historical detail, and do a good job of contextualizing these movements in the broader historical matrix. I suspect these chapters would have lost nothing through abandoning the terminology of "Gnosticism".

When she departs from specifics and histories however, and ventures into broader comparative work, DeConick's analysis tends to become ahistorical. For example, to justify her use of Gnosticism as a *sui generis* "spiritual orientation", she compares it to fundamentalism, describing them as "spiritual orientations that people of different religious affiliations embrace" (9). "Fundamentalism", however, is not a

timeless and universal variety of religiosity, but a historically situated term, emerging specifically in the context of American conservative Baptists in the 1920s (Riesebrodt 1993, 10-11; c.f. Marty and Appleby 1991). So while she is correct to say that there are "Christian fundamentalists as well as Jewish, Buddhist, and Muslim fundamentalists" (9), this is true only from the point of view of a contemporary observer who is universalizing Protestant terminology. Likewise, the revolutionary and countercultural nature of Gnosticism as she describes it seem more to address the concerns of a modern observer than the historical context in which it is situated.

DeConick's scholarship is in the service of a personal quest; she says as much in the introduction, and this may help to explain her anger at the critical turn in Gnostic scholarship. Her role, she makes clear, is to *advocate* for the Gnostics, and explain why these writings which "captivated" and "electrified" her became "forbidden" (1-4). Like the Eranos scholars, then, DeConick speaks to Eliade's *Homo religiosus*, with a firm emphasis on individual experience as the pinnacle of religiosity (Wasserstrom 1999, 239-41). This phenomenological Gnosticism imposes onto the past the concerns of present-day scholars. As Wasserstrom writes:

> The problem with a gnostic History of Religions is that it imposes patterns on the past that were never (demonstrably) there in order to draw lessons for a present that isn't (demonstrably) here. This ahistorical recycling, this eternal return of the same, suggest a gnosis arrogated to the historian by an a priori disgust with modernity, not by research into reality (1999, 241).

DeConick shows that she is indeed disgusted by the "trendy" (5) academic work which threatens to dismantle the category upon which she has placed so much professionally—and possibly also personally. But she also suggests her disgust with modern society, too, or at least what she sees as religion's conservative role in it. Thus we should not be surprised when the closing pages turn to open advocacy for how Gnosticism can reform contemporary society for the better:

> Gone is the God of damnation. Gone is the focus on sin and retribution. In its place is the God of Love that the Gnostics claimed to know. Separation from God and reunification with the sacred has become the story of salvation. Behind it all is the individual as the divine human agent empowered to do great things. The demand is for therapy, for religion that is useful. To be successful, religion today must promote personal well-being, health, and spiritual wholeness. It must be attuned to a raising of consciousness, to global awareness, to life that is linked with the transpersonal or transcendent (350).

*New Age Gnosticism?*

The refrain that the situation for the ancient Gnostics somehow parallels our own time has been there since the rediscovery of Gnosticism in the 19th century: Jonas saw the Gnostics as precursors to Existentialism; Jung saw the Gnostics as the forerunners of psychoanalysis; Hanegraaff, as forerunners of Esotericism; Voegelin saw Gnosticism in modern political movements; Harold Bloom saw it in contemporary American Protestantism. Always, however, the connection between ancient and modern Gnosticism is based upon vague philosophical parallels, and often outright conjecture, rather than specific historical connections.

Nor is DeConick the first to make the connection between New Age and Gnosticism. In fact many Theosophists believed that the Gnostics were their forerunners long before their writings inspired the groups we now know as the New Age *senso strictu*. Jung was informed by G. R. S. Mead's *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten* (1904 [1960], 22-23), in which the scholar and Theosophist sought to legitimize his controversial faith through appeal to the heresies of the Gnostics. It is unclear whether he took this idea from Theosophical founder Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, or if she from him, but either way, Theosophy influenced the earliest scholarship on Gnosticism, which in turn influenced Jung (Hayman 1999, 119).

A number of more recent works have also sought to make the connection: Carl Raschke's *Escape to Eternity* argues that new religious movements from Theosophy to Zen are an example of a "gnostic consciousness" emerging since the 19th century, a rejection of history over knowledge of the self, which he sees as a dangerous flight from contemporary realities (1980); Ingvild Gilhus (drawing primarily from Harold Bloom's interpretation) discusses a Gnostic narrative in New Age discourse, which she argues

represents a countermove against the decentering of the self in the contemporary world (2001). The most influential recent version of this connection, however, is that of Wouter Hanegraaff, particularly in *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (1996). It argues that New Age religion/s are a popularized, commodified version of what he calls Western Esotericism, which is essentially the sum of magical teachings which come to us through the Middle Ages. The defining feature of this tradition is a "third pillar" of knowledge, neither Reason nor Faith, which he identifies as Gnosis. This model is in fact derived from Quispel, as Hanegraaff acknowledges (1998 20, 42).

The title of *The Gnostic New Age* is rather misleading, however. The New Age is addressed directly only in the final chapter, which is a mere ten pages, though DeConick attempts to keep the modern world in the reader's mind through a device which frames each chapter via a comparison to a recent film, and through frequent references to Internet technologies. Her use of New Age is practically untheorized, and shows little awareness of recent historical and empirical research (e.g. Sutcliffe 2003; Kemp and Lewis 2007; Sutcliffe and Gilhus 2014; Gilhus, Kraft and Lewis 2017). Instead, the New Age is described as an "aggressively countercultural", transgressive "form of spirituality", another untheorized emic term (343).

Even so, the comparison requires some sleight-of-hand to achieve. The anti-cosmism of most understandings of Gnosticism is hardly consonant with the ecological holism of the New Age milieu, but DeConick dispenses with this in a single paragraph:

> The Gnostic spirituality of the Hermetics is quite tempered when it comes to our universe… It is this tempered form of Gnosticism, not the forms that framed our world as a dark, demonic place, that became the undercurrent of Western spirituality (348).

That Hermeticists and the New Age spirituality that followed might have imposed this oppositional reading onto a small, disparate group of texts held together by application of a heresiological term is not explored. What DeConick misses is that Gnosticism parallels New Age because *it was invented by the same people, at the same time*. The heresiological legend becomes part of the cultic milieu through the Theosophical society, takes on a psychoanalytical aspect through Jung, and normalizes a narrative of individualism which reproduces the unregulated free market social order of the post-

War West. While to her credit, DeConick acknowledges that Blavatsky and Jung are "the grandmother and grandfather of New Age religion" (349), she does not mention that Mead (whose translation of *Pistis Sophia* influenced Jung and Jonas, and therefore all later Gnostic scholarship) was a *student* of Blavatsky. The proto-New Age Theosophical teachings influenced the academic understanding of the Gnostics, *not the other way around*. The critique of institutions, the emphasis on experience and individual growth, were read into these texts at the same time and in the same social context as the New Age movement was forming with these ideas at its core. She claims that the discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts triggered a "Gnostic awakening" that "inspired an unprecedented renaissance of Gnostic spirituality in America" (350), but this cannot be true. Very little of Nag Hammadi was published in English before 1977, yet the roots of New Age far predate even the 1946 discovery at Nag Hammadi, developing out of late Theosophical ideas in alternative communities in the interwar years (Sutcliffe 2003). Indeed, most new religions who identify as Gnostic, such as the Aun Weor groups or the Ecclesia Gnostica, have a demonstrably Theosophical or Rosicrucian heritage in the 19th century (Robertson 2018).

Instead of awareness of the genealogy of the term, however, we get rhetoric based on assertion and even intuition, leading to passages that read more like *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* than contemporary scholarship:

> Historians are very reluctant to make anything out of these types of "coincidences" [note dismissive quote marks] because of the long time between past and present and the clear lack of historical cause and effect… Nonetheless, the similarities are too close to credit to mere coincidence. Something is going on here, and it begs for an explanation… My need to come to terms with this similarity, with the meeting of Gnostic and New Age minds across the expanse of two thousand years, compelled me to write this book, to map the origins of Gnostic spirituality and to try to understand its survival in modern American religion (344).

*Conclusion*

*The Gnostic New Age* succeeds in demonstrating that an ancient tradition with many, diverse representatives has survived until today, albeit under different names—to

whit, the phenomenological History of Religions. The phenomenological approach—like all theoretical models—is not simply a disinterested description, but contingent upon the interests and context of those who produced and developed it. In this case, it represents a school of scholarship which is committed to a *sui generis* religious experience, but critical of religious institutions, and they see themselves as both scholars of religion and religious scholars. The Gnosticism of Eliade, Quispel and DeConick, then, is Elite Knowledge in both senses.

The Eliadian context is more profound than simply his involvement with the Eranos Circle, however. Like Shamanism (c.f. 41), Paganism, and even Hinduism, Gnosticism escapes its etic context to become an emic self-identifier. Such categories potentially offer a rich seam of data for the critical scholar of religion on our involvement in how knowledge is produced in the field. However, this would require the shift from scholar-as-caretaker to scholar-as-critic to spread from those with a focus on theory and methodology to those operating in particular area studies, especially as Religious Studies departments increasingly become organized by area, rather than by methodological focus. Already we see a predominance in such areas for scholarship with a methodological focus on "material" or "lived religion" which obscures a phenomenological paradigm in which religion is a self-evident sui generis entity that we must only observe all around us. Clearly, such a shift will present particular problems for scholar-practitioners, and indeed this is a problem in disciplines which tend to be dominated by insiders, such as Pagan Studies (Davidsen 2012) and Islam (Hughes 2015).

*The Gnostic New Age* also demonstrates the need for better interdisciplinary work in the field of religion. It is a curious result of Religious Studies' emergence as a discipline that it tends not to consider early Christianity, or indeed classical religion at all, as these are considered the domain of Biblical Studies and Classics or Archaeology, respectively. Comparatively few theoretically-focused RS scholars started with a focus on Christianity; conversely, those with training in Biblical Studies and other area studies tend not to be so concerned with broader theoretical concerns. Therefore the theological and colonial issues with certain categories have yet to trickle down, and as a result, they seem to have taken root in the gaps between the disciplines. Interdisciplinary work needs to be more than strip-mining other disciplines for terms and approaches while

ignoring the third-order analysis of the use of such terms, as DeConick does. Religious Studies will benefit as much from the hermeneutic and historical skills of Biblical Studies as much as Biblical Studies will benefit from a keener awareness of the political implications of comparative categories. There is a need for a critically-informed, empirical comparison of popular and alternative religion in the early Christian period and today, but this is not it.

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